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**For Zain Bhai**

As if the year 2020 had not been a nightmare enough for us, the first month of 2021 brought a day that shocked us – the progressives and journalists of Karachi – to the core. Zainul Abedin, the op-ed editor of this newspaper, left us all alone to fight the oppression which he had taught us to fight bravely with the power of our pen.

Zain Bhai or Zain Sir, as I used to call him, was a teacher and a scholar par excellence. For the past two and a half years, I had been visiting him at his house – him in his room, surrounded by books in tall shelves on every wall of the room. Ask him any question, and he would not only be eloquent in his answer but also cite tens of books on the subject.

Having seen his grip over political ideas especially Marxism, I could not even think of becoming his pupil. But he was generous enough to offer me classes on Marx’s ‘Das Kapital’ after I requested him. He knew I had been unsuccessfully trying very hard for years to decipher the beginning of the book.

I don’t know how to describe the experience of learning Marxism from Zain Bhai. I was just beginning to delve into the depth he had painstakingly made me stare into. It is heart wrenching beyond words that he left us so soon. I could only finish the first chapter with him (except for the last very important part on commodity fetishism). No one had ever taught me that book like that. I would even easily say that to me David Harvey’s lectures seemed vague in front of Zain Bhai’s teaching. His grip on the book showed me what it actually means to read ‘Marx on his own terms’.

“This is a book which has blood on it because Marx gave his life to complete it while his children kept dying of hunger. At least people who call themselves Marxists should honor the old man and try to read this book”, he would tell me while criticizing a few leaders on the Left who treat younger comrades as fodder and would never read Marx’s greatest contribution themselves nor encourage others to read it.

Zain Bhai was an authority on Marxism and he often told me that he was preparing notes for a book of sorts that would help readers here learn what Capital is about. He would get angry and upset if someone mentioned the Urdu translation of the Capital available in the market and advised people to stay away from it.

Contrary to many scholars who would spend their life fixated on a certain field of study, Zain Bhai had diverse interests when it came to reading and research. He was a Hafiz e Quran and had a wide range of books on Rumi, Iqbal, and other Islamic philosophers. Once he laughingly told me that he had long ago read all the works by Maulana Maudoodi, preferring to read Maudoodi during his mealtimes when he was young. This came to me as a surprise but he reasoned that in order to seek the truth one has to study all contemporary ideas.

People would form a sort of club or entourage around Zain Bhai – such was his charismatic personality. He had told me about The Reasoners, a group of young people he had managed to get together while in the right-wing-dominated university. Later on, he had joined other leftist groups but with time, he left activism and busied himself in research and Marxist study.

Despite being a highly well-read and knowledgeable man, Zain Bhai did not let arrogance touch his demeanor, even though a little haughtiness would have perfectly suited him. He knew he was a people’s man. Last year when Iran’s commander Qassem Soleimani was assassinated in an attack by the US, I met him and vented out my anger. He asked me if I wanted to write an article. The first draft sounded like it was written by an angry young Iranian man. To fix it, he invited me to his place, and took hours to teach me how to control my emotions while writing, and how to write objectively. No one of his caliber had shown this much interest in me or encouraged me this way ever.

Zain Bhai would always emphasise independent scholarship. He had a major issue with people who toed the party line even if it went against the truth, something which could be seen easily. When Afghans were being thrown into the flame of extremism and militancy in the name of religion, much to his chagrin a certain party he was associated with in the past had come up with a slogan: “We support the Taliban unconditionally but critically.” He knew where this line was coming from; the white men sitting in Europe who did not know the ground dynamics of our region.

Zain Bhai would also rue the lack of a culture of debate, especially within parties. “First we have to ask ourselves: Is a party made to serve humankind, or is man born to serve the party?”, he would question me whenever I asserted that a party has to have authority over our lives.

He would ruefully tell me that leftist leaders were afraid of intellect. “But intellect is not that bad a thing, comrade,” he would insist, adding that studying one’s own society and history is of utmost importance and something that no political person should shy away from.

This might be the precise reason why he spent his nights reading and doing extensive research on various subjects. When once I told him how hard it was getting for me to give time to reading and studies while working a fulltime job and that I would rather spend my free time lazily, he told me – much like an older brother would – “I know this happens at this age. But, my friend, what a person does when he has time at his disposal tells a lot about the person. The way someone spends their night tells a lot about who he actually is”. This was one of the most beautiful things he had said to me and I will remember it till I breathe my last.

Zain Bhai was taken away from us too soon. He was the light that filled our dark lives when we needed it the most. I shall always be grateful to the man who made me fall in love with the people’s heroes yet again: Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, Fidel and his favorite Che Guevara.

Zain Bhai, you shall not be forgotten for you proved that you were as great as the ideas you spoke of. Hasta Siempre, comrade.

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